

RE-READING *FILM ABOUT A WOMAN WHO...*
: A Study of Filmic Identification in the Context of Roland Barthes's Notions

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ABSTRACT

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(Under the direction of Dr. Carol Mavor)

Film About a Woman Who..., is the second feature length film made from 1972 to 1974 by Yvonne Rainer. Rainer juxtaposes images, texts, narrative and music and intermingles them in her filmic space, which confuses and frustrates the viewer who is accustomed to the linear narratives of most films. Most critics generally categorize the film within the avant-garde feminist film movement due to its experimental film form and social metaphors. But rather than addressing mainstream gender-specific discourses, this paper places the film in the context of Roland Barthes's notion of pleasure/bliss, the *neutre*, and readerly/writerly reading to explain viewers' free and individual identification. Furthermore, it explores and analyzes the meaning of both cliché and anti-cliché, and of the temporal dialectics in re-presenting autographical diaries.

For Two Pieces of Fragmented Iron.

(사랑하는 부모님께)

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Another promise of fragments is that they alone will survive the catastrophe, the destruction of meaning and language, like the flies in the plane crash which are the only survivors because they are ultra-light. Like the flotsam in Poe's maelstrom: the lightest items sink the most slowly into the abyss. It is these one must hang on to.¹

Introduction

Film About a Woman Who... (1974) was the second feature length film of Yvonne Rainer who is well-known as a dancer and choreographer at Judson Church Theater in New York City in 1960s. The film is based on her mixed-media theater work, *This Is a Woman Who...* performed in 1973.² The disturbing narratives and random organization are not trimmed or transformed into neat film frames, which frustrates viewers as they attempt to grasp the narrative. It is the difficulty of constructing a linear narrative that makes it impossible to describe the film in a manner that is easily understood. However, what can be presumed is that the film depicts the lives of four characters whose romantic relationships with one another offers them a space for reminiscing their past. At the beginning of the film, the four protagonists (whose names are given as simply D, S, J, and R) watch a slideshow (Fig. 1), as a photograph of J and R in the foreground of a New York harbor scene dissolves into a full frame linking the image of the couple to the following film narrative: they make a journey into their own past (Fig. 2-1~ 2-5). In particular, the film draws on past events of a female protagonist (R) in terms of her

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments: Cool Memories III, 1990-1995*, trans. Emily Agar (London, New York: Verso, 1997), 9.

² The performance was first held at Theater for the New City on March 16, 1973 by John Erdman, Yvonne Rainer, and Shirley Soffer. They also showed Rainer's early dance works. *Inner Appearances* (1972), *Three Satie Spoons* (1961), *Walk, She said* (1971), and *Trio A* (1966).

romance (with D), inner-conflict, solitude. Ultimately, she finds a way to reconcile with those matters.

The disjunction of images, narration, texts, framing, and music and their incoherent layering leads the viewers nowhere but into chaos. At the same time, the moments engendering boredom embedded in the film encourage one's mind and imagination to meander and flow away from the film into the individual's space. Moreover, illusory narrative and objectification of female characters were themes critical to second-wave feminism and to the subsequent rise of women's experimental filmmaking in the 190, which radically departed from traditional filmmaking. Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), for example, deals with the issue of feminism by experimenting with highly constructed forms such as austere camera movement, tight grid of controlled spaces, minimum verbal communication counterpointed by heightened sounds.³ These rigorous film forms as well as the hyperrealistic but distanced renderings of a female protagonist's life are not explicit filmic attempts to deconstruct the viewers' gaze – the one of man, in particular – and illusory identification of viewers. But Akerman's film is consciously responding to those issues within feminism and feminist discourses as both Akerman and critics acknowledge. Because 1970s feminist filmmaking is characterized by the radical formalism of Chantal Akerman, Lizzie Borden or Laura Mulvey, and the specific theoretical principles that informed these feminist films, Rainer's films fall within the category of these gender-specific works. However, Rainer may share not only the filmic forms but also subject matter, such as sexuality, women's victimization, and body politics,

³ Ruth Perlmutter, "Visible Narrative, Visible Woman." *Millennium Film Journal* 6 (Spring 1980), 18-30

with “the vital women’s movement in the same period,”⁴ there are more significant discourses and metaphors in her works that separate her films from dominant issues of gender.

1971 was a key year for avant-garde cinema, witnessing the release of a score of works that by now constitute its orthodoxy. There could hardly have been a body of work, though, more foreign to most of Rainer’s intentions: the avoidance of emotion, psychology, even character, a purity of expression and damn the consequences, an emphasis on the materiality of the film screen/frame/grain/splice/flicker/camera, an antipathy to narrative and cinematic representation.... There was quite a line of demarcation between the dominant avant-garde direction and the sort of emotional and procedural investigation that Rainer was pursuing.⁵

The cinematic re-presentation of Yvonne Rainer, which fragments the story and evades authorship confounding the film’s supposed meaning: it is drawn in light, elliptical circles and thus slips away from any ideology or categorization. Her films are permeated with unique metaphors, unfixed but potential empathy in and among the characters and audience members, and the poetics of autographical history. Examining one film in particular, *The Film About a Woman Who...*, this paper explores the significance of open spaces for viewers’ identification, the matters of emotional and neutral quality, and the temporal dialectics in re-presenting autographical diaries in the context of Roland Barthes’s notions of pleasure/bliss, Neutrality, and readerly/writerly reading.

Feelings Are Facts

⁴ Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (New York: Dutton, 1976), 266-67.

⁵ B. Ruby Rich, “Yvonne Rainer: An Introduction,” *The Films of Yvonne Rainer*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 3.

Cliché is, in a sense, the purest art of intelligibility; it tempts us with the possibility of enclosing life within beautifully inalterable formulas, of obscuring the arbitrary nature of imagination with an appearance of necessity.⁶

Leo Bersani, a literary theorist, articulates the aesthetics of cliché in the introduction to Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* in terms of the "druggist's magnificently comical enthusiasm for clichés" and "the artist's less complacent but perhaps no more successful efforts to make language contain reality."⁷ The language that Flaubert was fascinated with and employed is no more than that of everyday life. The language Flaubert borrowed as well as his characters' enthusiasm do not draw reality-distanced fantasia to delude the readers. Rather, the novel, language, and characters in it dwell in ordinariness. Cliché, in *Madame Bovary*, is "already there-ness," a beautiful, inalterable, necessitated agency in art. *Film About a Woman Who...* with its un-cliché form and radical juxtaposition of filmic materiality, however, is explicitly enclosing cliché. The words, the texts, and the rendering of the characters' relationships, particularly those of the four protagonists, are vague at some points, but the film depicts couples' involvement in romance and the melodramatic, banal ending is the conspicuous theme in the film. It avoids decent words, illusory images, or thrilling subjects, which encumbers or effaces cinematic pleasure to some extent. Yet, most lightly and banally the film registers the fragments of cliché in and around the space of cinema, which viewers would find or recognize as the quality of the very clichés. As Barthes affirms in

⁶ Leo Bersani, "Introduction," In *Madame Bovary*, trans. Lowell Bair (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), xviii. Rainer also used this quote in a projected slide during *Inner Appearances* performed at Festival of Music and Dance, A'attico, Rome, June 14, 1972.

⁷ Ibid., xvii

The Neutral, it is like experiencing or recognizing “the very movement of the Neutral” from “death as banal to the banal quality in death.”⁸

Medium long shot (MLS): D and R in bed. (Fig. 3-4)

John Erdman’s narration (J’s voice): He is puzzled by her behavior.

Inter-Title (IT): 4

Medium close-up (MCU): D and R in bed. His eyes are open; hers are shut.

J’s voice: She pretends to sleep.

IT: 6 She imagines herself telling him to go away.

IT: 7

MCU: D withdraws hand.

IT: 8 She decides to demand his affection.

IT: 9

R (sync): Would you hold me?

IT: 10

MCU: D takes R in his arms.

IT: 11 She tells him she’s upset.

...

J’s Voice: He apologizes.

IT: 13

J’s voice: She whimpers.

CU: D and R kissing.

J’s voice: He congratulates himself on clearing up the matter. He becomes aroused.

IT: 15 They make love.

IT: 16

CU: Kiss

J’s voice: She participates with pleasure, but something is still bugging her.⁹

The scenes above are marked with numbers from 1 to 48, which functions not only as a token of the accreting anger as the inter-title, “An emotional accretion in 48 steps,” signifies, but also it doubly fragments the narrative; the minimal narrative neglects to answer the question “What is going on?” The cause of the couple’s conflicts, mainly, the women’s feelings – the emotional truth – is ungraspable by the bizarre collage of images, narrations, and intentional partitioning by numbers. The lovers talk, exchange feelings,

⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 83.

⁹ Yvonne Rainer, “Film About a Woman Who...,” *The Films of Yvonne Rainer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 85.

make love, and experience conflict in the disjunction and discontinuities of the arbitrary sequence of scenes. Unlike the bedroom scenes in many other cinemas, which are commonly adorned with illusory bodies bathed in darkness and accompanied by intriguing narrative, *Film About a Woman Who...* shows the uninflected discourse of cliché which itself includes formal anti-cliché. Another bedroom scene from *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) contains the subtle and contradictory quality of cliché in the bedroom scene. (Fig. 5-1. 5-2) In it, an unnamed woman – a mother/housewife and part-time prostitute, possibly, Jeanne Dielman as one can presume by the film title – and an unidentified guest (Jeanne’s client) perform the monotonous movements, bodies, sex and orgasms on a bed. The quotidian in the bedroom scene is not different from any housekeeping chore like Jeanne’s potato peeling in the kitchen or her meticulous washing a bathtub and her body. And the “literal” and realistic representation of Jeanne’s repetitive gesture and her presence runs through most of her film texture. Yet, the banal and literal bedroom scene holds off its meaning and unfolds a “fictive climax”¹⁰ by showing Jeanne’s “performative” murder (Jeanne kills her client after she feels orgasm). The cliché activates its subversive power and displays the “latent fictiveness” in it. The monotonous works, everyday objects in the household, impersonal sexual relations and their muteness are nothing other than violence which generates viewers’ re-thinking of Jeanne Dielman and her routine behavior. Margulies elaborates in her book, *Nothing Happens*, that the potential effectiveness of cliché in film (Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman*) lies in the recognition of the difference that the cliché can

¹⁰ Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 83.

still meaningfully suggest.¹¹ Akerman's use of cliché embedded in well-regulated formal structure and its balance with film contents reveals a pivotal anti-cliché event and possibly, its social and psychological meanings which I would not go deeper and argue about. Rather, I would briefly look through Maya Deren's short film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), which similarly illustrates the potential violence of everyday objects. A house key, a large flower, or a bread knife laid on a bed is the very cliché but also acts as a transitional object. The woman's hallucination transforms their everyday application into a destructive weapon; a large flower a man (maybe her lover) leaves on the bed becomes a knife (Fig. 6-1, 6-2) that she uses it to puncture the mirror surface of the man's face (his face is seen like a mirror by her hallucination). What she pricks is not the face of a man but the mirror reflection of "she". The shards of mirror glass dissipate into the ocean (Fig. 6-3), which dissolves into her own death on the couch-she kills herself. The bedroom scene in Deren's film also draws both cliché and anti-cliché through the mundane objects and their potential power of subversiveness, which ultimately cast questions on identities, death and possibly, a complicated matter of gender.

Film about a Woman Who... renders "task-like" movement of two protagonists' bodies on the bed. Here the bedroom scene cliché is a dull picture of characters' mechanic dialogues and movements. They purely "purvey the information." Yet, the neutral characters and their delivery of cliché ironically involve emotional matters. The irony stems mostly from the contradictory synthesis of the neutralized acting of protagonists and their deadpan faces with the spoken and written language; the latter is far more emotionally rendered than the former. As Ruby Rich explains, "Contradiction is

¹¹ Ibid., 84.

the basic grammar of *Film About a Woman Who...*, dialectic in its movement and cliché frequently its vocabulary.”¹² The form contradicts the contents destroying the coherence that the viewers’ senses automatically anticipate; the eyes focus in expectation but cannot confirm or recognize what the ears hear. The viewers trust neither what is seen nor what is heard, which thrust the senses outside the obligatory structure of meaning and language; “to outplay the paradigm”¹³ as Barthes states. Rainer describes “the film’s breakdown, the frame and its synthesis, as a disruption of the glossy, unified surface of professional cinematography by means of optically degenerated shots within an otherwise seamlessly edited narrative sequence... I’m talking about films where in every scene you have to decide anew the priorities of looking and listening.”¹⁴

How can one sort out the various, tangled subjects in the film, and how can one fill the chasm between looking and listening? In addition, how can one understand the film’s contents, which are both neutral – the objective and minimal characters in the film between the camera eyes and viewers eyes – and emotional- the contents of the film? The subjects in the film (emotional and neutral) seem to be incompatible, as are “feelings” and “facts,” terms that comprise the title of Rainer’s book, *Feelings Are Facts*. Though it is oxymoronic, the title makes sense when one studies the dance career of Yvonne Rainer who has largely utilized “neutral doers”¹⁵. The term of Rainer’s neutral in “neutral doers”

¹² Rich, “An Introduction,” 7.

¹³ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 7.

¹⁴ Yvonne Rainer, “Some Ruminations Around Cinematic Anecdotes to the Oedipal Net(tles) while Playing with de Lauraedipus Mulvey, or He May Be Off-Screen, but...,” *The Independent* 9, no. 3 (April 1986) quoted in Peggy Phelan, “Spatial envy: Yvonne Rainer’s The Man Who Envied Women,” In *Unmarked*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 74.

¹⁵ The “neutral doers” is a term, which is, in general, used to refer to Rainer’s dancers in her most well-known dance “Trio A.” Unlike the traditional choreography, which is climactically consistent with dancers’

(dancers), to some extent, parallels Barthes's notion of "neutre"¹⁶ because neutral doers in her dance are meant to obscure paradigm of gender and its binaries, which are epitomized in dancers' objectified, sexualized, and to-be-seen bodies, from the viewers' gaze, seduction and subjectivity. The neutral doers are Rainer's quasi-ethical and political devices to make or release both dancers and viewers from gender, gaze and bodily phantasma. On the contrary, Rainer's neutral doers do not display emotion, intensity or the "ardent burning activity" as Barthes might passionately include in his neutre. The reason for exclusion of affects and intensity in Rainer's neutrality is that "her neutral" mostly depends on minimalism. Barthes draws explicit lines between his notion of neutre and minimalist concept of neutral; Barthes considers the minimalism as a false image of the Neutral because the Neutral does not erase the affect but only processes it, formats its "manifestations" and because the minimalist neutral has nothing to do with aesthetics, but only with ethics.¹⁷ This keen observation of differences between neutrality in minimalism and Barthes's neutre can be more clearly historicized with Rainer's career transition from dance to film, which is crucial to grasp the contradictory subject matters of Rainer's film.

Yvonne Rainer began her career as a dancer in 1961, and choreographed dances and performances throughout the early 1970s. Her transition from dance to film can be attributed to the lack of emotion that her dance works generated in the audience and that the bodies of neutral doers have long neglected and driven out. Carrie Lambert explains,

emotive and narcissist movements and which anticipates spectators being moved and emotionally engaged, "Trio A" articulates the dancing bodies without any spectacle or seduction. It is almost task-like dancing. Rainer mentions in the 1960s on her dance work as "No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe... no to seduction of the spectator by the wiles of the performer.... No to eccentricity no to moving or being moved." The neutral doers disapprove of the audience's voyeuristic gaze and illusory pleasure and so efface the spectacle and dramatic structure.

¹⁶ Neutre means neuter in French. Here I use this term for Barthes's own notion of neuter.

¹⁷ Barthes, *The Neutral*, 199.

Countering a dance of seductive display with one of pure materiality, Rainer sets up an opposition between dance as image and dance as corporeal substance. If conventional dance freezes the performer into mere images, Rainer's was meant to offer contact with the facts of the body in motion, its physical effort.¹⁸

The realistic body movement in Rainer's dance is in direct opposition to the narcissistic, emotional, "sexually disguised exhibitionism of most dancing."¹⁹ Rainer states that the demands made on the body's actual energy resources appear to be commensurate with the task – be it getting up from the floor, raising an arm, tilting the pelvis, etc.²⁰ This emphasis on actual, present, and physical, "task-like" body movement obviously participates in the Minimalist aesthetic.²¹

As Lambert suggests, Rainer's dance was informed by the Minimalism in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. During this period, she is actively engaging and working with contemporary artists such as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Rauschenberg. In particular, Rainer explains that she used Cagean effects in her dances, such as chance procedures, improvisation, repetition, and indeterminate sequencing.²² However Rainer's *task-like* bodies and the borrowed Cagean knots of "untransformed/ordinary everyday movement"²³ do not allow her to cultivate an emotional rapport with audiences. Sally Banes points out, "Though dance of her immediate predecessors- the moderns, including, most notably Martha Graham- made the

¹⁸ Carrie Lambert, "Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer's Trio A," *October* 89 (Summer 1999) , 98.

¹⁹ Yvonne Rainer, *Work: 1961–73* (New York, New York University Press, 1974), 71.

²⁰ Yvonne Rainer, "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Amidst the Plethora, or an Analysis of *Trio A*," *Minimal Art, Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), 67.

²¹ Lambert, "Moving Still," 98.

²² Yvonne Rainer, "Looking Myself in the Mouth," *October* 17 (Summer, 1981), 66-67. Dances, here in particular, mean many of Rainer's early dances (1960-62) at Judson church in New York City.

²³ *Ibid.*, 67.

emotions their privileged domain”; Rainer could not deal with the emotional affects because of her “avowed minimalism.”²⁴

The Minimalism, as Rainer reflects, shaped the unseen underbelly of the nuts and bolts of emotional life ignored and denied in the work of her 1960 peers. While Minimalists in early 1960s put much weight on “quotidian materiality,” their unconscious lives unraveled with an intensity and melodrama that inversely matched their absence.²⁵ For Rainer who had already much empathy on the absence in Minimalism, dance was not an adequate medium not only because the task-like body in dance disregards personal and emotional intensity, but also her minimal dance as a sort of authority explicitly categorizes and burdens Rainer and her ongoing works. In the end, she found that filmmaking was the best medium for her approach to emotions. In a letter to Nan R. Piene after Rainer’s first film screening in 1973, she confesses,

I had started to talk about how as a dancer the unique nature of my body and movement makes a personal statement, but how dancing could no longer encompass or “express” the new content in my work, i.e., emotions... Dance is ipso facto about me (the so-called kinesthetic response of the spectator notwithstanding, it only rarely transcends that narcissistic-voyeuristic duality of doer and looker); whereas the area of the emotions must necessarily directly concern both of us.²⁶

Rainer describes her new interest in emotion as “the preoccupation with the specifics of emotional life”²⁷ This new interest is not only her personal motivation to move toward

²⁴ Noel Carroll, “Sally Bane’s *Dance, Emotion, Film: The Case of Yvonne Rainer*,” a talk at the symposium in April 1999, quoted in Noel Carroll, *Moving and Moving : From Minimalism to Lives of Performers*,” *Millennium Film Journal* 35/36 (Fall 2000).

²⁵ Yvonne Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts: A Life* (London: MIT Press, 2006), 391.

²⁶ Rainer, *Work*, 238.

²⁷ Rainer, *Feelings*, 398.

filmmaking, but more significantly, it ‘uniquely’ envelops her films in which neutral doers (task-like bodies) and the emotive drama intriguingly coexist.

As representative of Rainer’s milieu, *Film About a Woman Who...* is characterized as an ambivalent work, not necessarily as a contradictory film. The film is a melodrama encompassing both the aesthetics of the neutral and the emotional. In addition, it is a film that explicitly shows “traumatic”²⁸ bodies in minimalist dance. It is a trauma marked as neutral, realistic, cliché by kinetic bodies and movements. Conversely, it is the trauma which has long been latent in her dance as an “absence”. In this sense, the film is seen to point toward Barthesian Neutral that seeks both cliché, minimalist restriction and aesthetics of affects and emotion.

Nevertheless, apart from the history or characteristics of trauma and its ambivalence, one might wonder who owns the trauma. Is it the film that re-presents the trauma own the trauma? Is it the female protagonist known only as “she”? Does dance itself bear it? Or is it Yvonne Rainer’s trauma who intently hones and creates art from it? The fragmentary subjects/objects in the film defer the answer. In the following pages, this paper further explores through the discourse of narrative/narrativity how these fragments of *Film About a Woman Who...* slowly “sink into the depth”²⁹ as in Baudelaire’s description of the promise of fragments which survive the catastrophe and fall into the depth.

²⁸ Patrician Levin used this term in “Yvonne Rainer’s Avant-Garde Melodramas”, *Women and Experimental filmmaking* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), edited by Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman. The author specifically refers this term in relation of the neutral doers in Rainer’s dance to the gendered trajectory of film history. Since Rainer’s neutral doers in dance are conscious strategy for avoiding voyeuristic spectatorship, the trauma of neutral doers is parallel to the one of the feminism filmmaking. Yet, what I intend to write by the term “traumatic” bodies is different from Levin’s meaning as seen above.

²⁹ Baudrillard, *Fragments*, 9.

Is 'The Author' Really Dead?

Who is Sarrasine? In reading Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes inquires about who is "the castrato disguised woman" in the novel: How can we/he identify the woman, Sarrasine?

This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings and her delicious sensibility Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology?³⁰

Barthes does not answer the question posited, while he places or sublimates the lost identity in '*jouissance* (bliss)', the abyss of the loss and slippages of subject, identification, and signification practices. The fragments of Sarrasine, his or her womanliness, empirical/authorial Balzac, and oscillating reader, Barthes goes deep into the jubilant but solitary space; as Barthes says "the asocial character of *jouissance*: the abrupt loss of sociality but solitude. Extremity of the clandestine, darkness of the motion-picture theater."³¹ The social, cultural, and ideological codes pervert and decompose themselves and obliquely attach to the personal invariables. It is like a peculiar movement or an emergence in which one of the fragments like Sarrasine's fussings or her sensibility in the text falls into the poetic space or a dark theater, resisting homogenization or its rigidity. It is like a piece of womanliness in man grazing the skin of text, as it lightly and continuously defers the meaning and floats only to be sunk.

³⁰ Roland Barthes, *Image-music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142.

³¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 38-39.

Film About a Woman Who... evokes Barthes' writerly reading. One would scrutinize the texts and images in the film searching for the most general sense of cultural metaphors, but the film rarely allows a generic idea or a spectacle for cultural film perception. Rainer destroys the typical sequential, structured body of a work by mingling the past and present and switching narrations of the anonymous characters, which blurs the filmic narrative. Does this film "have" a narrative? Rainer explains,

I suppose that there have always been those works that can rightfully be called neither narrative nor non-narrative. Works that share both narrative and non-narrative characteristics.... A series of events containing answers to when where why whom gives way to a series of images, or maybe a single image, which, in its obsessive repetitiveness, or prolonged duration, or duration, or rhythmic predictability, or even stillness, becomes disengaged from story and enters this other realm, call it catalogue, demonstration, lyricism, poetry or pure research... And there may always be the possibility for a simultaneous co-existence of these modes... The tyranny of a form that creates the expectation of a continuous answer to "what will happen next?" fanatically pursuing an inexorable resolution... in space and time... seemed more ripe for resistance... Can specific states of mind be conveyed without being attached to particularities of place, time, person, and relationship? Can an audience learn to abandon its narrative expectation? Can subject matter dealing with perceptual and photographic phenomena be sequentially-rather than narratively- linked to material that has already been invested with "storyness?"³²

Rainer's concern is the "tyranny" of narrative form and its function in films that "fanatically pursue the inexorable resolution." She advocates a work whose constituent parts do not necessarily form an anti-narrative, but are images of varying duration³³, repeated, together forming a non-narrative narrative film. Rainer seeks to destroy the hierarchy of the narrative form so as to permanently release the frozen filmic perception of viewers. She considers herself a filmmaker who is obsessively conscious about

³² Yvonne Rainer, "A Likely Story," *Idiolects* 6 (1978):13-14. Quoted in Shelley Green's *Radical Juxtaposition: The Films of Yvonne Rainer*, (N.J. and London: The Scarecrow press, 1994), 35.

³³ Rainer frequently uses "the duration" of time in *Film about a woman who...* . For example, there's a scene that three family members simulate posing for photographs in oceanic space. Each of their posing simulation extends and prolongs the duration of time, which marks ineluctable movements both in film and in life.

depriving the audience members of the codes and regulation that normally make a film understandable.

In this perspective, Rainer's film strategically avoids the impulsive narrative and the enforced filmic movement that has been counteractively engaged in so-called "sadism in traditional narrative filmmaking," as written in the well-known essay of Laura Mulvey. Mulvey asserts, "sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end."³⁴ Mulvey thus casts the relationship between the narrative and the viewers' sadistic pleasure as antagonistic. More problematically, the male gaze and female objectification in relation to film performance and filmic identification³⁵ have been central issues to feminism, avant- garde feminist films, and feminist politics.

From this perspective, not surprisingly, Rainer's struggle to frustrate the traditional concept of narrative and visual pleasure has been seen not necessarily as the enthusiasm for "pure research" as Rainer suggests, but rather as a gender-specified anti-narrative, anti-visual pleasure strategy. *Film About a Woman Who...* is not an exception to the categorization as such in terms of both feminists' subjects³⁶ and the film style Rainer employed; nevertheless, Rainer proclaims her early films as feminist unconscious

³⁴ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 840, 1975. A reworked version of a paper given in the French Department of the University of Wisconsin, Madison in the spring of 1973.

³⁵ The idea of the male gaze and female objectification is generally suggested in Mulvey's essay. Mulvey asserts, "the determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*." Ibid., 837.

³⁶ Rainer deals with subjects like 'victimization' and 'an issue of Angela Davis' in this film, which could be critically regarded as feminist discourse in general sense. Yet, there's no direct and necessarily fixed codes indicating those representations to the gender specific subjects.

works. Ruby Rich speculates that “while Rainer does not consider herself a feminist, while feminism is never the central issue in one of her films, her work is central to feminism.”³⁷ Yet, considering the writerly reading of her film, I suggest that Rainer does not locate her film within gender specific discourse. Though her film strategy of non-narrative narrative and image disjunction is parallel to feminist filmmaking, but it is not a conscious tool to topple the political and social hegemony, which ultimately joins or forms another politics or ideology. Rather, her film involves Barthesian Ni-Ni³⁸ materiality- neither narrative nor non-narrative, neither eyes nor ears perceive, and neither “she” in the film as female nor as male. It enables the viewers to confound any paradigmatic structure or gender binaries; the Barthesian neutre abets them in Ni-Ni suspension. The lighting, chaotic fragments of narrative, images, and frames concern the unfolding of the viewers, of their own peculiar affects and territories. After “destruction of language and meaning”³⁹, the flotsams of the film sink deep into the abyss. It is like rain after thunder- the nature of its movement precipitating into the depths of the underground.

The film begins with the sound of thunder and rain in the darkness and a subsequent a scene of the four protagonists⁴⁰ watching slides of family photographs.

(Fig.1) At the same time, Rainer’s voice narrates as follows:

Yvonne Rainer’s narration (Y’s voice): He feels a growing irritation. He had run into her on the way to the shooting. He hadn’t seen her for a year. Some banter was exchanged. Now

³⁷ B. Ruby Rich, “The Films of Yvonne Rainer,” *Chrysalis*, 2 (1977): 126.

³⁸ Ni-Ni means Neither-Norism.

³⁹ Baudrillard, *Fragments*, 9

⁴⁰ The protagonists –two females and two males are unnamed in film, but the film script uses D, R, S, J.

D scratches nose⁴¹

he is reviewing the conversation in his mind, “She hasn’t changed a bit,” he muses to himself. His mind works in spirals as he watches the slides.

Earlier this week she saw them on the other side of the street and was surprised at her

R crosses legs.

response- mild distaste rather than the rage she had anticipated. The whole thing now seemed rather sordid....He thinks about making love, then being in love, then about performing...

no image

She tries to reconstruct the passage from the novel that had so impressed her. The best she can do is: “All is finally clarified. It is unspeakable, but clear. The reach of my jealousy, of my certainty of betrayal, engulfs me at every step. (Sound of rain fades out.) It is unthinkable that I live in this condition in intimacy with another person. And the possibility of living a life without intimate connections is equally intolerable. Is it any wonder that the most plausible solution is to remove my existence? I see no way through my dilemma.....I am not one to compromise.”⁴²

The narrative is confusing and the chasms remain unbridgeable. From the beginning of the film, not surprisingly, one would ask, “Who is She?” Is the She (Yvonne Rainer) who narrates the same ‘she’ in the images? If so, what is the conflict that puts her in her dilemma? Is her anxiety about the intimate relationship with a man or about the social interaction she faces in everyday life? In addition, which happened first, the four protagonists watching slides or the event that Rainer narrates? Yet, the nebulous but tingling questions are not resolved by the end of the film, which frustrates the viewers’ expectation of clearing up the ambiguities and of a nice melodramatic ending. The desire for narrative and understanding its meaning remains unfulfilled but *continuous*. The absence or confusion of linearity directs and manipulates the narrativity in the film. De

⁴¹ D is a male protagonist, and this sentence describes the real shot in which he scratches his nose.

⁴² Rainer, Film script of Film About a Woman Who... , 78, edited by Lauretis.

Lauretis writes in “Desire in narrative”, “The goal of narrative theory is not narrative but narrativity; not so much the structure of narrative (its component units and their relations) as it works and effects. What narrative seeks is the nature of structuring and destructuring, even destructive, processes at work in textual and semiotic production. Here she interrelates narrativity with desire in that representing narrative in any kind of form from myth, cinema, folklore or historical narration necessitates desire and re-examination of its function- narrativity.”⁴³ The narrative in *Film About a Woman Who...* calls attention to its destructive effects and how desire works, resulting in endless and critical inquiries.

But isn't there any pleasure in the film? Aside from the issue of the film's conscious efforts to destroy visual pleasure in the context of gender specific discourse, one can purely analyze the source and its effects of pleasure. “It is said that analyzing pleasure or beauty destroys it.”⁴⁴ Yet, the process of destroying it is not so much nullifying the quality as sublimating it. As *Film About a Woman Who...* dissipates and jolts (Barthes' term) the viewer in the middle of turbulent filmic materials and non-narrative-like narrative, there exists a pleasure that is desirous to erupt and to be an “orgasmic novelty”⁴⁵ “There is here an effacement of pleasure and a progression of bliss.”⁴⁶ As *Film About a Woman Who...* displaces the four protagonists into the neutral position- in and out of the film frames,⁴⁷ viewers' narrativity and active desire need to be

⁴³ Teresa de Lauretis, “Desire in Narrative”, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 105.

⁴⁴ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 835.

⁴⁵ Barthes, *Pleasure*, 41.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁷ The four characters are actual viewers who watch the slides, which become full frames. Hence, the characters are both film performers and spectators.

placed in the film frame. The pleasure of the film lies not in the scopophilic viewers⁴⁸ but in their potential and insecure position in and out of the film. It is the very “pleasure’s force of *suspension*, a veritable *époché* (balance).” The pleasure of text as *neuter*⁴⁹ with which Barthes was so consumed is not different from the filmic pleasure which has unlimited, movable chasms, signifiers, and values. The film opens up desirable spaces for an individual and its perverted narrativity with elliptical pleasure.

One of the alluring and pivotal pleasures in *Film About a Woman Who...* is the poetics of the film. The notion of poetics seems especially relevant to the work of a “writerly” filmmaker like Rainer, who writes her films much in the sense in which a critic, such as Barthes or Virginia Woolf, or a philosopher, such as Irigaray or Derrida, might be said to write an essay.⁵⁰ The film is poeticized, but not necessarily because the incoherent images and narrative require the poetical imagination of spectators or because womanliness⁵¹ in the film accords with femininity and poetical space of a female in gender discourse.⁵² The poetics is like a Barthesian idea such that “it was there, like life itself.”

Y’s voice: I just got it in the mail. You want to hear it?... . “This is the poetically licensed story of a woman who finds it difficult to reconcile certain external facts with her image of her own perfection. It is also the same woman’s story if we say she can’t reconcile these facts with her image of her own deformity.....Nothing is new anymore, thank god.

⁴⁸ Mulvey’s term from “Visual Pleasure.”

⁴⁹ Barthes, *Pleasure*, 65

⁵⁰ de Lauretis, “Strategies of Coherence”, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 121

⁵¹ Womanliness, here, simply signifies that the film is a story about “she” and her conflict, romance, and past.

⁵² Any debate is possible on this matter but seems no good end since the pleasure of the film, specifically this film of Rainer, is light, elliptical, potential and transitional – the narrativity is individual.

Now at last she can use her head and her eyes. If the mind is a muscle then the head is a huntress and the eye is an arrow.⁵³

Rainer's frequent use of objects in her early films, such as letters, guns, suitcases, and boxes, are sort of a replacement of the boxes and balls of her dances. In this film, she also uses the objects like boxes, balls, and mattresses borrowed from her dances. Rainer used the objects for "their melodramatic or narrative connotations."⁵⁴ The objects' immanent everyday meanings encounter poetics as do letters and envelopes.

(Fig. 7-1, 7-2. J carries box of envelopes, which he drops as he opens a door. He goes in, closes door, comes out again, starts to pick up envelopes.)

The image (Fig. 7-1, 7-2) of a box of envelopes J carries and drops is farther into the past than Rainer's narration about the mail. Temporally distanced in the film, though, these two objects intimately involve each other. Many empty envelopes fall onto the street in the film. They are unfixed and interchangeable objects whose metaphor or meaning is *postponed* by the potential of the letters within them. The indeterminate agency and the openness of the numerous envelopes on the street act as the empty full signs. Barthes contemplates on the Japanese Boxes made up of rich materiality like cardboard, wood, paper and ribbon. The laborious confection of the making and *fastening* are no other than art. Thereby, the box like an envelope or a mask is not just a surrogate to wrap the object in but itself also becomes an object. In contrast, the very object in the box loses its existence and becomes a mirage; the signified flees and the package is emptied.⁵⁵ In a similar sense, a box of envelopes J carried and dropped cannot be devalued by the original object- the letter that Rainer later narrates. The envelope

⁵³ Rainer, Film script, 93-94.

⁵⁴ Rainer, *Feelings*, 400.

⁵⁵ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang), 45-47.

mediates time and inflects objects. What the envelope has suspended is the truth of time and the past-ness of “she”. As Barthes maintains, the function of the envelope is not to protect the object in space but to postpone it in time. It is the violence of time, memory and fragmentation as the letter elucidates the protagonist “she”, her psychic conflicts, poetic license and her body—muscles, eyes, a head—split into pieces. The envelope is art that conceals the truth. It is both a full and emptied sign.

At a certain point, not having seen any familiar landmarks for a while, she realizes that she is lost and experiences a powerful exultation. The discomfort of her body, the presence of the night, her solitude – all give her an acute sense of the moment. She finds a vacant grassy lot, gropes her way past the open door of a parked truck, and vomits... Almost regretfully she goes directly to the hotel, willing to take care of her body, reluctant to terminate being lost in the sleeping town.⁵⁶

(This narration follows after the 40 film stills from *Psycho*, and it is synchronized with the scene in which a woman walks down the street at dawn.)

(Fig.8 : She groans at the pros, Fig.9-1, 9-2: *Psycho* film stills: Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)

“The acute sense of the moment” is the liminal moment of seduction and death, private and public, and past and present. The scene reveals a moment of solitude in which the body of “she” is split, while vacillating between loss and exultation. It is the unfathomable gap between body being anxious about the “perfect image” and its actual movement, which is continuously impaired and fragmented by the other.⁵⁷ Hence, “she” goes to the hotel to “take care of her body.” The woman can be likened to Marion in *Psycho* who needs to hide her body, longing for a narcissistic shower. The forty film stills of Marion’s death from Hitchcock’s *Psycho* in *Film About a Woman Who...* moves fast and smoothly. The purity and bodily pleasure of Marion while in the shower is interceded.

⁵⁶ Rainer, Film script, 89.

⁵⁷ As the previous narrations about “She” indicates, her conflicts can be attributed to a narcissistic image of herself and its perfection

The other (Norman Bates) cuts her jubilant body into pieces and deprives the moment of recuperation—a recuperation from her crime and anxiety.

Marion's early death at the beginning of *Psycho* spurs the unfolding of the history of a murderer and his mother. "The split body," ironically, initiates the psychological narrative. It may be the logic of body or nature of narrativity, which goes forward and backward within spatiotemporal dialectics.

As de Lauretis suggests, all narrative, in its movement forward toward resolution and backward to an initial moment, a paradise lost, is overlaid with what has been called an Oedipal logic - the inner necessity or drive of the drama – its sense of an ending inseparable from the memory of loss and recapturing of time.⁵⁸ What de Lauretis further suggests is the sublation of Oedipus' vision into the superior being capable of bridging the visible and the invisible worlds, as Freud, Dante, Plato and Vico did. They envisioned human development in narrative terms as most of us do in writing (auto)biographies and diaries or speaking about our personal or public lives. This was not an idiosyncratic choice but the effect and the demonstration of the structure of "what is simply there, like life itself."⁵⁹

With the natural use of cliché in language and images in *Film About a Woman Who*, as this paper suggests at the beginning, Rainer not idiosyncratically, but brilliantly keeps the rain going on throughout the middle phase of the film. Rain is the object prodding memory, which enables the four protagonists to make a journey into their past. As Rainer narrates in the film, "The rain makes her think of when she was 18 years old,

⁵⁸ De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, 125.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 126. The sentence in quotation is from Barthes.

spending a summer in Chicago.”⁶⁰ Through the sound of rain at the very beginning and display of a series of slides both to the four characters and viewers, Rainer relives the past, unties familiar bonds, and introduces disorder into the well-regulated unfolding of everyday life.⁶¹ Yet, fictional past-ness in *Film About a Woman Who...* is grounded in Rainer’s past, her own history. Rainer re-presents episodes in her own checkered past, events that would be fictionalized through narrative fragmentation, incongruous combinations, and uninflected delivery of lines designed to invoke, not replicate the real.⁶² The memory-evoking scene of the female protagonist who relates a long story of her childhood and a necklace is mostly based on Rainer’s real experience, as she explains in her autobiography, *Feelings Are Facts*.⁶³

As some critics assert, Rainer has already written her autobiography in her films, and she does not disapprove of it. However, she consciously adds, “My work is personal, but not ‘strictly’ autobiographical.”⁶⁴ Rainer’s writing of her personal history-but not ‘strictly’ autobiographical- may epitomize the “absent cause,” which is inaccessible to the spectator (the interpreter of the film) and even to herself (the autobiographical filmmaker) except in “textual form” or narrativity,” which needs “a prior textualization or

⁶⁰ Rainer, Film script, 79.

⁶¹ Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement, “Sorceress and Hysteric”, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wong (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 5.

⁶² Rainer, *Feelings*, 409.

⁶³ Ibid., 81. In Chapter 3, “School years and Incidentals,” Rainer writes a story about Philip, a friend of her brother, Ivan, and mentions the Mexican necklace that Philip gave her after his trip. In the film, however, she fictionalizes the account slightly, depicting their relationship as delicately romantic, which is not obvious in her book.

⁶⁴ Rainer, *Work*, 276. Rainer’s remark that her work is “not strictly autobiographical” is a response to Jonas Mekas who writes, “It (the film) had something very personal. It all pointed to some very personal experience of Yvonne herself, with man-woman relationships, doubts, re-evaluations.”

narrativization in the political unconscious”⁶⁵ “The Real” that Jameson suggests, however political, public, or personal, is mediated to a certain extent or fragmented and re-presenting history is a process of interpreting and interacting with the Real. In this perspective, autobiography is not just a writing or unfolding of past events but interacting with the signified Real, which is re-interpreted and re-read both by “I” and others.

Returning to the poetics in *Film About a Woman Who...* in relation to representing one’s personal history, the film matures toward the end with the four characters’ dances in and out of synchronized music. Without a word, the narrativity of the film effects most of its poetic moments, which involuntarily evoke Yvonne Rainer. The continuous message of characters’ circular movements in the film- running in a circle at Battery Park, a group’s running in the rain, and a couple’s performing with a ball (Fig.10) poeticizes the narrative space of Rainer’s history. Is the author really dead in this film? As far as “writerly” reading is valid or it necessitates a weapon to penetrate *Film About a Woman Who...*, paradoxically, the author is at the center of the film. The pure research begun with the Nietzschean interrogation which is reserved and concealed⁶⁶ inspires and raises pleasure into “bliss.”

Time In Dialectics

⁶⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 21.

⁶⁶ Nietzsche’s term “Hinterfrage (Back question)” is “the most essential question of any text.” Quoted in Peggy Phelan’s article, “Feminist Theory, Poststructuralism, and Performance” *TDR* (1988-), Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 1988), 108. The term of Hinterfrage means the questions which come from the acts or words that are hidden, reserved, thereby could be cheating. The insidious questions that Nietzsche explains in *The Dawn of Day* infer that the questions evoked from invisibility or absence make it possible to penetrate to the truth or essence of any unrevealed text, act or representation. Here I use this term as an interrogation derived from the proclaimed “absence of Author” in this film.

This book is not the book of his ideas; it is the book of the Self, the book of my resistances to my own ideas; it is a recessive (récessif) book (which falls back, but which may also gain perspective thereby).⁶⁷

Through the discourse of narrative and narrativity of *Film About a Woman Who...*, this paper has suggested Yvonne Rainer opens the viewers' active space and broadens their pleasure, and through a "writerly" filmic reading, it has further explored how Rainer relives accounts from her own fictionalized diaries, accentuating them with poetic aesthetics. Briefly mentioned in the previous section, the female protagonist has inner conflicts regarding her body, being anxious about having the "perfect image" and its movement and subsequent splitting into pieces. The psychic narrative continuously/unconsciously echoing through the film intrigues and develops into the melodrama that interweaves bodies, relationships, and time. Peter Brook explains that conflicts and psychic structures produce what we might call the melodrama of psychology.⁶⁸ The drama of psychic structure and its movement characterize the randomly organized film narrative of *Film About a Woman Who...* Rainer explains her conscious use of psychological narrative in the interview with Noël Carroll in 1980 by saying,

Previously I used whatever interested me. I was able to absorb and arrange most materials under some sliding rule of thumb governing formal juxtaposition. Everything was subsumed under the kinds of collage strategies that had characterized my dancing, and could even include a kind of mechanistic or quasi-psychological narrative.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Roland Barthes, "The Book of the Self (Le livre du Moi)", *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 119.

⁶⁸ Peter Brook, *The melodramatic imagination: Balzac, Henry James, and the Mode of Excess*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976)

⁶⁹ Noël Carroll, "Interview with a Woman Who...", *Millennium Film Journal* 7-9 (Fall-Winter 1980-81), 44.

Rainer ruminates on her film in which “her dancing” and “mechanistic or quasi-psychological narrative” are integrated. The “quasi” in “quasi-psychological narrative” presumably means the emphasis on dancing in her film or it may be a conscious remark because of the heaviness that the term, psychology, bears. She weaves her film with intriguing psychological drama. In any event, in this final phase, the paper examines the psychic drama of the female protagonist of *Film About a Woman Who...* in relation to temporal dialectics, particularly by analyzing a bedroom scene and the image of ocean.

Not only Rainer but critics agree that there is an elongated cord from her dance to films. Employing the objects of dance in filmic space, such as a mattress and a bed, Rainer links dance to film. She uses the mattress in many of her dance pieces as “a body supporting device with its immanent everyday meanings of departure and separation”⁷⁰ in “Parts of Some Sextet,” “Act,” and “Stairs.” “Parts of Some Sextet”, (Fig. 11) for instance, was a 43-minute dance for ten people and twelve mattresses. While Rainer was haunted by the minimalist manifesto- no to spectacle no to virtuosity...⁷¹ – she tried to draw the meanings of the mattresses – such as sleep, sex, death, and illness- in a dry and plodding way without affect or personal empathy. Yet, the mattresses inescapably involve intimate matters. They configure the theatrical space as both private and public, and both intimate and distanced as they possibly do in the filmic or photographic spaces. The ‘body’ supporting device most obviously and surreptitiously involves the double-edged space of life itself.

(Fig.11: Parts of Some Sextet. Fig.12: Daniel Boudinet’s Polaroid in Camera Lucida,)

⁷⁰ Rainer, *Feelings*, 400.

⁷¹ See footnote, 12

Daniel Boudinet's Polaroid photograph space of blue-green bedroom (Fig. 12) at the beginning of Barthes's *Camera Lucida* also entangles its emotional metaphor with distanced and concealing tact. Boudinet's bedroom Polaroid piece is a spatial referent of Barthes's mother and her death: its color signifies the blue eyes of Barthes's mother. The most personal metaphor is carried in this Polaroid picture. Yet, this piece also distances the viewers or readers since it is not an actual image of his mother but only a referent possessed by one's imagination. The beginning of *Camera Lucida* with the referential space of his mother – Boudinet's blue-green bedroom photograph – is the unavoidable and bodeful end of a trajectory Barthes has to return to- his own death. The bedroom in his book is a destined metaphor of both departure and separation.

In a somewhat different sense from Boudinet's bedroom space, Rainer depicts the bedroom scene enclosing romantic lovers' departure and separation in filmic space. The bedroom scene of *Film About a Woman Who...* is characterized by a female character's emotional and psychic conflicts. We see lovers (D and R) lying on a bed. (Fig.4) The camera eye gazes at the horizontal lines of the two bodies, which are in stark contrast to the vertical texture of the floor. The tall legs of the bed buoy up D and R, casting a loggy shadow on the floor. The words they speak float in the air,⁷² dissipating quickly, which prevents them from understanding each other. The emotional ravine between the two bodies gets deeper.

IT: 24 He continues to use the pronoun "we." He is pleased with his clarity.

...

IT: 26 He thinks the main fear "we" share is that getting gratification will result in a withdrawal of love by the other.

IT: 27

⁷² The only synchronized sentence R speaks out to D is, "Would you hold me?"

John Erdman's narration (J's voice): She agrees that "getting what you want" is the only way to proceed, but she...

IT: Doesn't express the annoyance she feels. Why is he talking about that now, and why is he saying "we"?

....

MCU: D and R lying in bed

IT: 41 In the morning she is hugely depressed.

IT: 42

IT: 43 She arrives home.

IT: 44 She is very angry.

IT: 45 She knows the crucial moment was when she said "Hold me."

IT: 46 Somehow she had betrayed herself. She hadn't wanted to be held.

IT: 47 (Do you think she could figure her way out of a paper bag?)⁷³

The inner-conflict of "she" in the film consciously relates to the other –"social interaction and intimate connection are intolerable." "Everything (every relationship) is about seduction or death as Madonnas holding up their male infants, saints holding their bloody foreheads ...lions holding their banners, virgins holding up mirrors."⁷⁴ The ineluctable relationship with the other is seductive, but simultaneously, "contemptible." Since she pursues a perfect image of herself, she does not allow it to be compromised by the other. Yet, she is already actively involved in society because even the closed space of the lovers' bedroom is for both seductive and contemptible social interaction. Here – the last part of the 48 scenes of emotional accretion –she exposes her anger and feelings of self-hatred, which intimately relates to "he." She anticipates unity in love and sex with the other in the same way she does for her own perfect image, but in reality, she is crushed into pieces; her words evaporate, the body lacks, "we" is deferred, and her anxiety to recover the perfection moves back into solitary illusion. The physical or daily interaction in bed thrusts her into a dilemma –a rigid rectangle "paper bag" that does not seem to let her out, however anxiously she wants to escape. It is an ordinary melodrama

⁷³ Rainer, Film script, 84-86.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 82. Rainer's narration about a visiting the museum of "she."

but it is also a reality-based psychological drama of “she” which renders an existential or fundamental problem of “everyone”. Here I would say “she’ is neither female nor male, or either of them. Reading *Film about a Woman Who...* is not getting to know about a woman but “she”, “a neuter” who resists being a female or a male. For this reason, my final reading could be said to be psychoanalytic rather than sociological as Barthes might say.

Jacques Lacan explains the ego’s anxiety in “Some Reflections on the Ego,” asserting that the illusion of unity, in which a human being is always looking forward to self-mastery, entails a constant danger of sliding back again into the chaos from which the self started: “it hangs over the abyss of a dizzy Assent in which one can perhaps see the very essence of Anxiety.”⁷⁵ The self’s anxiety is attributed to the contradictory movement between ego and subject. As Lacan illustrates in “The Mirror Stage as Formation of the *I* Function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” in *Écrits*, Ego has the vision of gestalt of the whole body, which is ill-grounded but the continuous misconception (*méconnaissance*) of its unity at mirror stage leads to a search for its illusory image. In contrast, after the mirror stage the subject experiences fragmentations, especially through the identification with the other, so that it perceives the image (real image) of the ‘body in bits and pieces (*corps morcelé*)’.⁷⁶ This oscillating movement of subject and ego continues during one’s lifetime like the swinging pendulum or the nature of ocean - endless movement.

⁷⁵ Jacques Lacan, Some Reflections on the Ego, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34 (1953): 15.

⁷⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink, (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002), 3-9.

In the film, “she” says, “Would you hold me?,” which is the first and last synchronized voice in the accretion scenes, meaning her anticipating body, the obstinacy of ego, desires to be fulfilled. Yet, the mirror is cracked. Her body is split into bits and pieces. Hysterically leaving him, his body on the bed, she ruminates that “the crucial moment was when she told him to hold her ...she had not wanted to be held.” Here, she does not admit her previous desire- *her history*, which was unfulfilled and frustrated her. What she believes is that, once again, with an *ideal ego*, she is nicely upright by herself in front of the mirror. Hence, the broken body desires to move backward again. The neurotic anxiety is inescapable, and conversely, it never frees her from “the external stimuli”, as Freud might say.⁷⁷

Is this a tragic human story in which the narcissistic ego and alienated subject repeatedly retroacts, jubilates, and frustrates? Or is this Lacanian rigid armor or the paper bag in which the female protagonist is stuck, a psychological or rather fatal drollery? Jane Gallop explains the avoidance of the tragedy of the self’s Sisyphean labor-like movement between anticipation and retrospection. “The avoidance of tragedy depends upon a retroactive effect reversing the internal impetus that lunges forward (se précipiter, precipitates itself) a retroactive acceptance of one’s foundations as fiction,” which “she” continuously fails to do in the film, while annihilating her fragmented past and justifying retroactive movement as the Real. She believes in the “orthopedics” (Gallop’s term) of her totality and its movement as Real. Gallop states that the acceptance of fictional ground in the ego means “openness to revision, rather than a rigid defense against the

⁷⁷ Charles Brenner, “An Addendum to Freud’s theory of Anxiety,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34 (1953): 21.

recognition of fictionality.”⁷⁸ Hence, “the immurement of the concepts like the armoring of the ego would end the more fluid interplay of anticipation and retroaction.”⁷⁹ It is the fluidity between bodily fragments and synthesis and between present and past, which sublimates past-ness into jubilant history.

Events of the past rose like waves and battering against her mind threw it into a wild commotion of shame, grief, and joy.... First an emptiness like a great white bird soared through her. Then she began to think about particulars: the quality of (his) intelligence at the moment..., (his) insight into nature of struggle.⁸⁰

Rainer’s narration transmits the feelings and events of “she,” who not only moves in and out of the film frames spatially, but also opens the temporal dialectics of the narrative of past. The fragmented images, texts, and any other filmic materiality indicate that the unavoidable lightness of being and its past become a personal history. With the openness of admitting the retroactive drama as a fiction, the film further alienates potential viewers as its “writerly” narrativity creates and progresses into another history. Barthes writes in his autobiographical book,

“he resists his ideas: his “self” or ego, a rational concretion, ceaselessly resists them. Though consisting apparently of a series of ‘ideas,’ the book is not the book of his ideas; it is the book of the Self, the book of my resistances to my own ideas; it is a recessive book (which falls back, but which may also gain perspective thereby)... Let the essay avow itself *almost* a novel: a novel without proper names.

Barthes’s book written through his entire bodies is not necessarily referred as the book of self or ego, but as the one of the Self – S in Self might indicate Lacanian capital letter. The recession of the book is the fictive retroaction of ego (Ego). In addition, it is openness to unlimited history writing either on Self and the other, which makes it

⁷⁸ Jane Gallop, “Where to Begin”, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 86-90.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 90

⁸⁰ Rainer, film script, 80.

possible by serving itself as a “sub-text” or “sub-narrative” The fragmentary form, image-repertoire, the plural masks and fictiveness in autobiography cannot but be “there” and be called “as almost as a novel”. *Film About a Woman Who...* like Barthes’s space of text recessively draws the meaning of the Self. The ellipsis at the end of the title of film avows its fictiveness and eternal deferment of “I”.

In a recent statement, Rainer talks about her films, “to some degree or another, which can be seen as an interrogation and a critique of *straightness* in both its broadest and most socially confining sense”: Straightness as a bulwark, as protection, as punitive codes against deviations from social norms that define and enforce the parameters of ideology.⁸¹ Rainer radically explores straightness, its absurdity and rigidity, and subverts them in and out of her films. Her resistance against straightness is not limited to the filmic conventions and fixed discourses of ideology, but rather, it opens any narrative, representation, history, and discourse against the straightness.

The film, an autographical drama of Self, emotion, movement, and of time ends with the image of ocean. (Fig. 13) Parallel to its nature of pendular movement and openness in blue, “she” reconciles her fictionalized desire and its endless back and forth movement. The last text is superimposed on the image of the ocean and its ebb and flow that “she is thinking of his penis again ... Now that she knew the truth about her feelings she was free to love him again.”(Fig. 14, 15)⁸²

“His penis” that she is thinking about again is not necessarily “penis envy” of Freud’s term; rather it is a Lacanian phallus as a signifier, eternally lacking both to male and female, which makes any subject enter the symbolic order, which is to enter

⁸¹ Yvonne Rainer, Statement on November 16, 1990 quoted in *Feelings are Facts*, 432.

⁸² Rainer, film script, 97

language.⁸³ Yet, as Gallop suggests in *Daughter's Seduction*, admittedly, “though Lacan distinguishes phallus from penis, ‘phallus’ the signifier in its specificity, in its letter not its spirit, is always a reference to ‘penis’.” Or within the interpreter’s desire or preference, the penis can easily be taken as a phallus.⁸⁴ Hence, I would suggest the word, penis, that “she” happily reflects is a phallus and its possible castration, which ultimately enables her to be open to the nature of fragments and to the retroactive fiction of being and time. “She” is able to embroil herself within another melodrama.

⁸³ Gallop, “Writing Erratic Desire”, *The Daughter's seduction: Feminism and psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), 95-96.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 98-100.



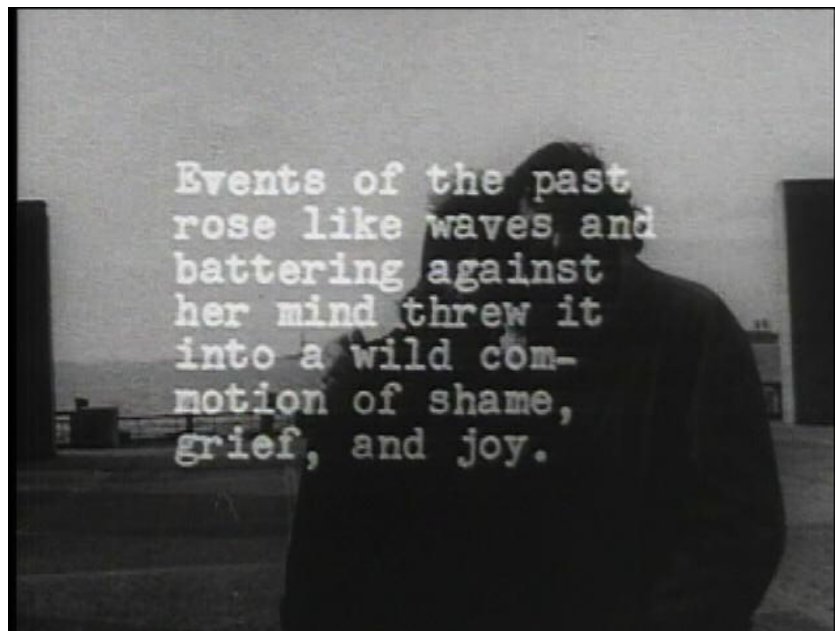
(Fig. 1: D, J, R and S sit in front of projecting slides.)



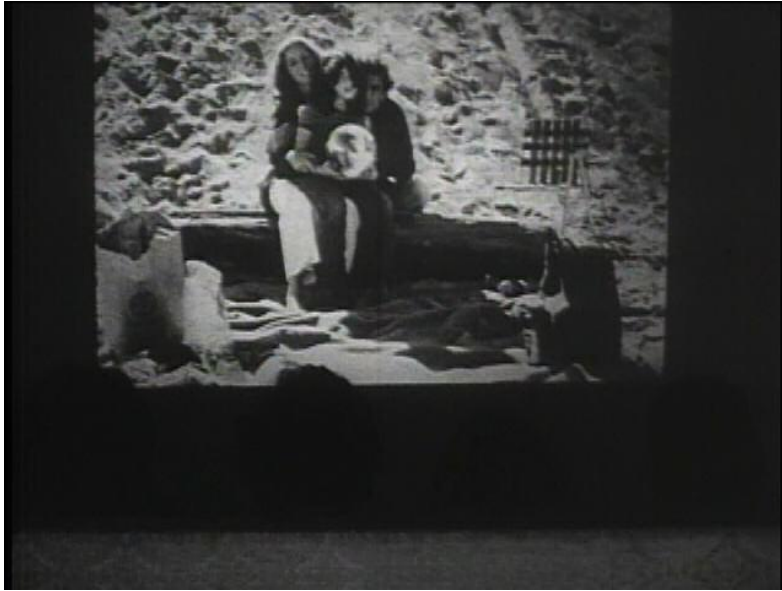
(Fig2-1: Four protagonists watch the slide of a photograph of J and R.)



(Fig.2-2: The slide becomes a full frame)



(Fig. 2-3)



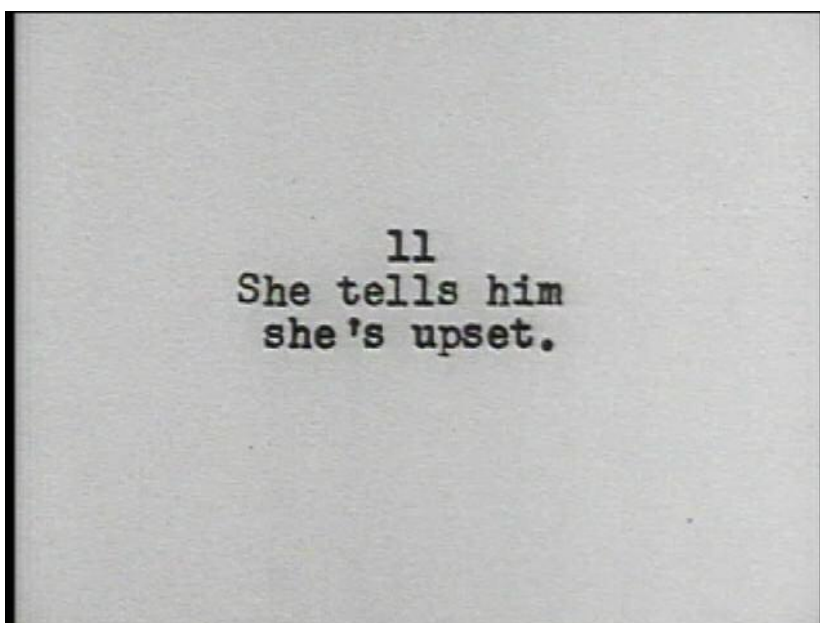
(Fig. 2-4: Four protagonists watch the slide of a family photograph of J and S.)



(Fig. 2-5: The slide becomes a full frame.)



(Fig. 3)



(Fig. 4)



(Fig. 5-1)



(Fig. 5-2)



(Fig.6-1)



(Fig. 6-2)



(Fig. 6-3)



(Fig. 7-1)



(Fig. 7-2)



(Fig. 8)



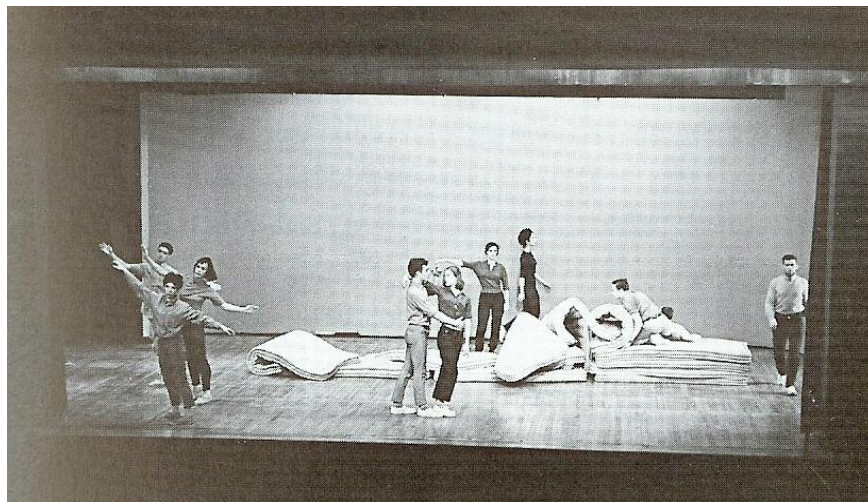
(Fig. 9-1)



(Fig. 9-2)



(Fig. 10)



(Fig. 11)



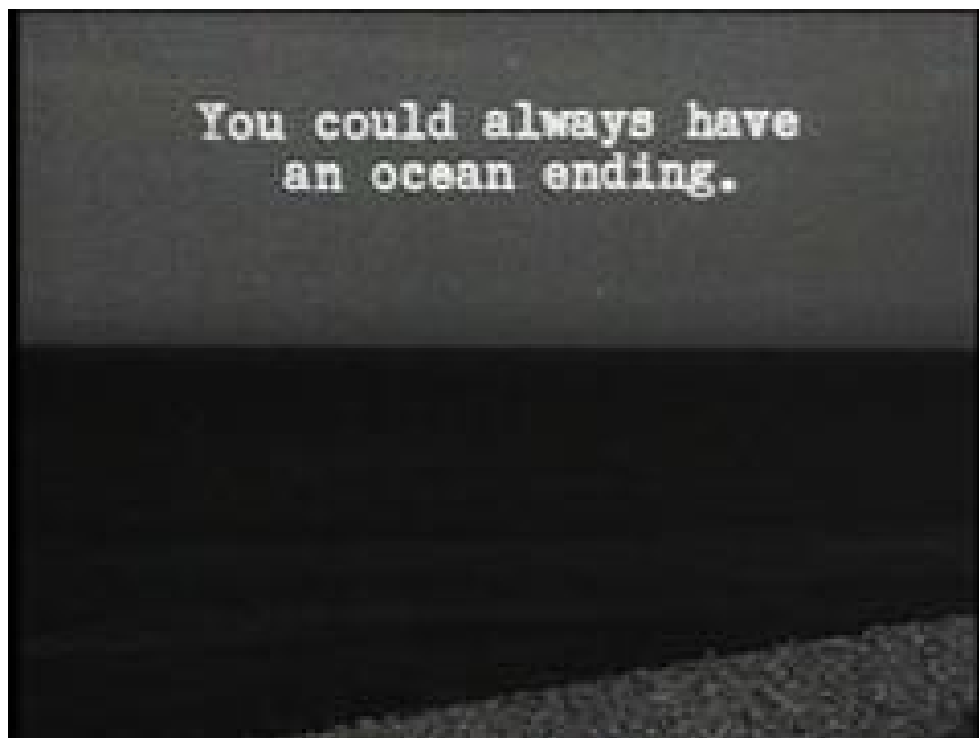
(Fig. 12)



(Fig. 14-1)



(Fig. 14-2)



(Fig. 13)

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